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ABSTRACT

The Collaborative Probing Model (CPM) is a heuristic approach to writing across the disciplines that stresses discovery, process, and assessment. Faculty input will help the English department design an oral and written communication block that will be unified by a series of interdisciplinary videotaped presentations. CPM also uses flow charting techniques adapted from computer science to generate new approaches to organizing or redesigning other English courses. In this model, assessment is understood as first of all observing and then judging according to criteria that are individual, not product based. Presented on a form to be used collaboratively by students and teachers, assessment criteria would include: (1) clarity of focus, (2) adequate development of ideas, (3) clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs, (4) appropriate examples and evidence, (5) appropriate word choice, (6) varied sentence structure, and (7) appropriate punctuation and usage. Finally, journal writing enables students to get in touch with the wholeness of the writing process where they see themselves as a part of a larger community of writers. (JL)

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FIRMING-UP CORE

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

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Sister Bernadette McInnis
NEH/Beaver College
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CS 207 186

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It is for her unqualified support and total collaboration that I am grateful to Claudia Smorada, my friend and colleague.

To Elaine Maimon for her breathless verve and inspiration, I wish to add a special thanks.

I thank also those of the institute staff - Gerry Belcher, Barbara Nodine, Finbarr O'Connor, Peggy Horodowich - who provided us with a wonderful example of collaborative teaching.

To Dr. Hilda Fell, our academic dean and Dr. William Lynch, our chairperson, I owe a special acknowledgement for the encouragement and support they bring to all our endeavors.

I would be remiss in not acknowledging, last but not least, all those who have participated with us in this institute. Their friendliness, academic concern, and sense of humor have created a fertile environment for discovering and sharing ideas.

This project, both mine and Claudia Smorada's, represents another step in an extensive revision and revitalization of Neumann's core curriculum which has been fermenting innovative ideas since 1979. In our planning together, Claudia and I have experienced first hand what Kenneth Bruffee explains so well: "that knowledge, especially that kind of knowledge which needs to be shared with others can be nurtured and developed best in a social context called collaboration." It was in working together in teaching composition that we came to see that collaborating brought a challenge to our own teaching styles as well as improvement in attitudes and performance among our students. In fact, this endeavor proved so rewarding that we wanted to extend this kind of satisfaction to other members of the faculty. Our project then, grew out of these two concerns:

For students - the quality of their reading and writing achievement;

For faculty - the quality of their involvement in this pursuit.

A writing-across-the-disciplines approach seemed an ideal way to integrate these two goals. We discovered soon enough, however, that both faculty and students must come to some common understanding about the nature and purpose of writing. We have selected the term Collaborative Probing to describe our approach toward establishing this kind of agreement. This approach then, is meant to generate organized, flexible and interactive ways to involve students, faculty and administration working toward making writing integral to learning in any discipline.

What I would like to share with you first is a visual, a heuristic if you will, to represent this CPM. Janice Laurer defines a heuristic as a systematic but flexible means for generating significant questions in solving particular problems. This approach is especially suitable to our needs because it allows us to make a variety of related applications. This particular model we find helpful because it represents the entire scope of our concern as well as our more specific goals. It enables us to explore, and formulate a number of strategies for dealing with the particular problems of course design and faculty involvement.

What we devised does not represent a linear process - that is, a set of sequential steps for reaching a specific goal. Rather, we wanted a model which suggests a dynamic process in which key activities are interacting and integrating at the same time.

Very simply, the three activities here represented - Discovery, Process, Assessment - allow individuals, Claudia and myself, students or faculty, to engage in a dialogue for discovering, adapting and implementing solutions for particular problems.

Let me clarify these activities:

DISCOVERY - probes which initiate activity,

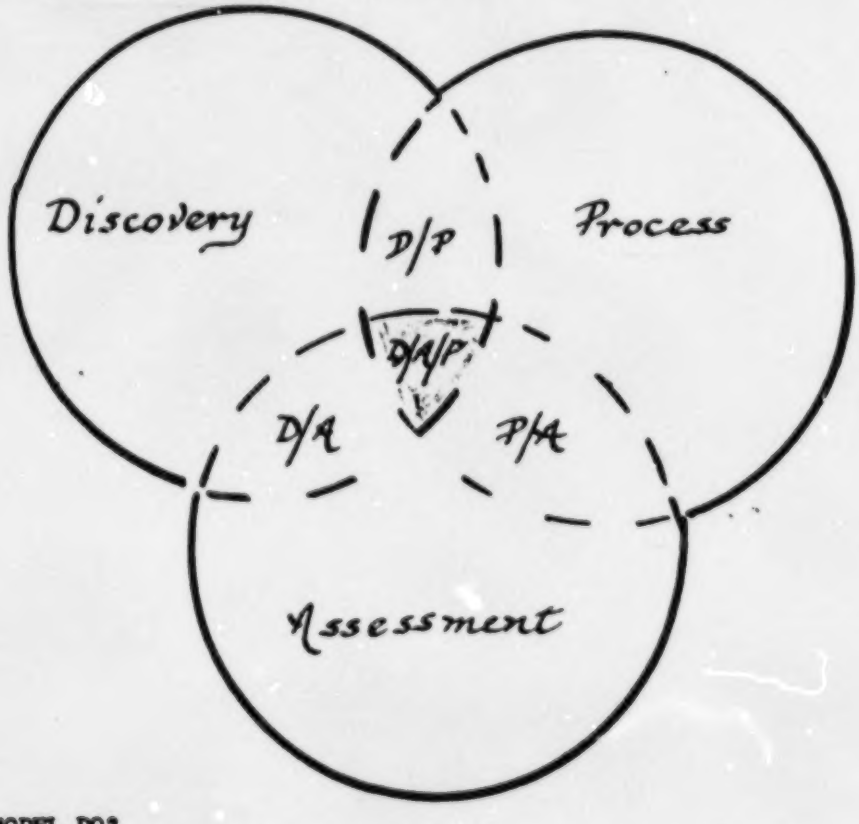
PROCESS - probes which sustain and modify the activity,

ASSESSMENT - probes which check the validity of the activity throughout the process.

I would like to qualify here our use of the term assessment. If we define what assessment <u>is</u> then we must associate it primarily with evaluation or judgment: if we, however, describe what assessment <u>does</u>, it suggests an ongoing process monitoring and checking to see that in the activities of Discovery and Process, we never lose sight of the whole.

Collaborative Probing

This model also represents the theory that permeates our work in core revision and curriculum development - holism: the whole is more than the sum of its parts - a concept we believe clarifies and supports the dynamic of Collaborative Probing. We have borrowed from Richard Young's axiom in his tagmemic theory where he explains the "more" as the richness and power derived from discovering the multiple relationships these interacting components can reveal.



WHAT DOES MODEL DO?

It provides a picture of three interacting operations.
Discovery - in which we explore/formulate solutions to problems.
Process - take action toward solving problems.
Assessment - question implications of these actions.

WHAT DOES MODEL MEAN?

The intersection of all three fields - Discovery/Assessment/Process - suggests a dynamic of being able to draw from each total field continually for further substance and clarity in developing solutions for problems.

The intersection of any two of these fields, on the other hand, allows persons to probe, process, and alter the communication of their experiences without losing sight of their original purpose.

Let me explain now some practical applications that have come out of this conceptual framework. Each indivdual on our faculty at one time or another has expressed the desire to help students become more effective communicators. Kenneth Bruffee inspired our strategy for encouraging faculty to move from this concern to action with these words, "First, we engage our colleagues' interest in the task we have undertaken. Second, we call upon their expertise in order to fill gaps in our own. Third, we draw upon institutional commitments to give meaning to our actions."

In an informal survey several instructors have already agreed that some of their students' problems deal with the basics of mechanics and organization of a text. Other students, instructiors observed, seemed unable to expand a subject except by combining ideas about it through already familiar or stereotypical ways. We want to put the CPM to use for devising more ways to engage more faculty, particularly those who teach students in our own courses in what we will call "structured chats." These chats are titled "structured" because we want them to reveal some specific information we can act upon.

We began by asking ourselves, "What is it that we want to know from our faculty?" The answers to these three questions:

1. What do members of our faculty need to know about writing-across-the-disciplines?
2. What can faculty tell us who teach composition about the place writing holds in their discipline?
3. What particular modes of thought predominate throughout a particular discipline?

Formulating just the appropriate questions which will not only blend in with those myriad of other topics over a cigarette or a cup of coffee but also will generate the kind of information we need to know is no easy task. Anyone who attended Kenneth Bruffee's session in collaborative

learning realizes how critical and elusive formulating just such questions is.

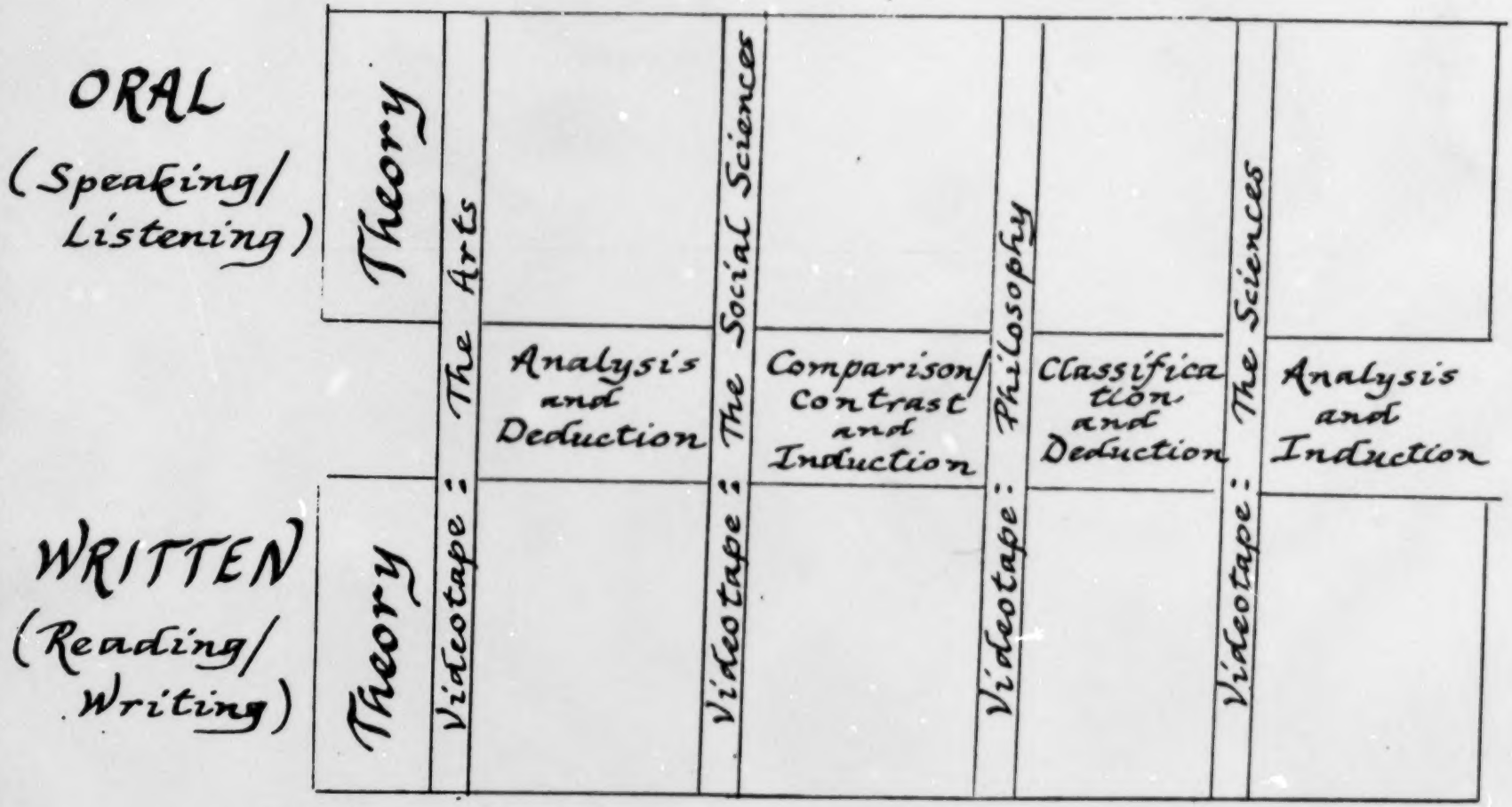
The questions we will try out first are:

1. HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE THE PLACE OF WRITING IN THE TEACHING AND UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR DISCIPLINE?
2. WHAT KINDS OF WRITING DO YOU ASSIGN MOST OFTEN?
3. WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CRITERIA FOR A WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IN YOUR FIELD?

Faculties' responses to these and like questions are particularly relevant to our own English department's work in revising a six-credit oral and written communication block. We intend to pilot these courses in the fall semester. As you can see it is a cross disciplinary approach in which both components - oral and written - are unified by a series of videotaped presentations. Members from each of the disciplines will present an explanation of their discipline and the modes of thinking which govern them.

We in the English department have tentatively chosen certain modes that we believe proper for each of these areas. It is important now for us to collaborate with other faculty members in testing out this new approach.

6 Credit (30 unit) Block



Another way in which Claudia and I are using this CPM model is for generating new approaches in organizing or redesigning these three courses:

1. Effective Writing: CPM will help me establish a focus for students' introduction to writing-across-the-disciplines.
2. Study Skills: Here CPM will suggest ways I can engage faculty from four core courses as consultants for devising meaningful reading/writing approaches.
3. Personal Development Seminar: Claudia will draw upon CPM for searching out ways to involve students in the more complex activities of analysis, problem solving, and communication.

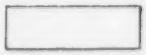
Exploring this model with a kind of playful approach has and continues to suggest new and creative ways for me to address an old question: "How can I devise strategies and approaches to improve upon what I am already doing?" An example of how I addressed this question is in the way I am applying some principles I learned from a computer science course taken last semester to my composition course.

I was surprised, for example, by the instructor's insistance that the first step in designing a program is to visualize as concretely as possible exactly what the output would look like on a screen or print-out. Was Walter Ong anticipating this concept when he recommended that the writer "give as much body and context as possible to the message before formally structuring it"? The task for students' Discovery phase became apparent. Try to get them to "see" or imagine their final draft not only intellectually but as a physical entity. Establish a familiar relationship between the persons who write, the individuals (real or ideal) who will read their message, and the concrete form this message can take. Students began immediately to generate

all the kinds of questions they believed would bring them to a clearer perception of the role they wished to assume and all those questions which could foster a greater familiarity between themselves and their readers. This kind of probing established almost immediately for them a kind of tangible and personal association with the reality of their purpose for writing. Richard Young addresses the next problem in the Discovery phase. His tagmemics' approach can help students to decide what details will allow them to include their readers in a shared experience.

The actual task of getting down to the Process of writing is often routine and distasteful to students, but presenting it visually in a new context makes the endeavor more interesting to me as an instructor and more attractive to most students. A flowchart similar to that used in computer programming allows the student and myself to understand the writing process with greater clarity and directness.

Composing involves three operations which the computer symbols can represent.



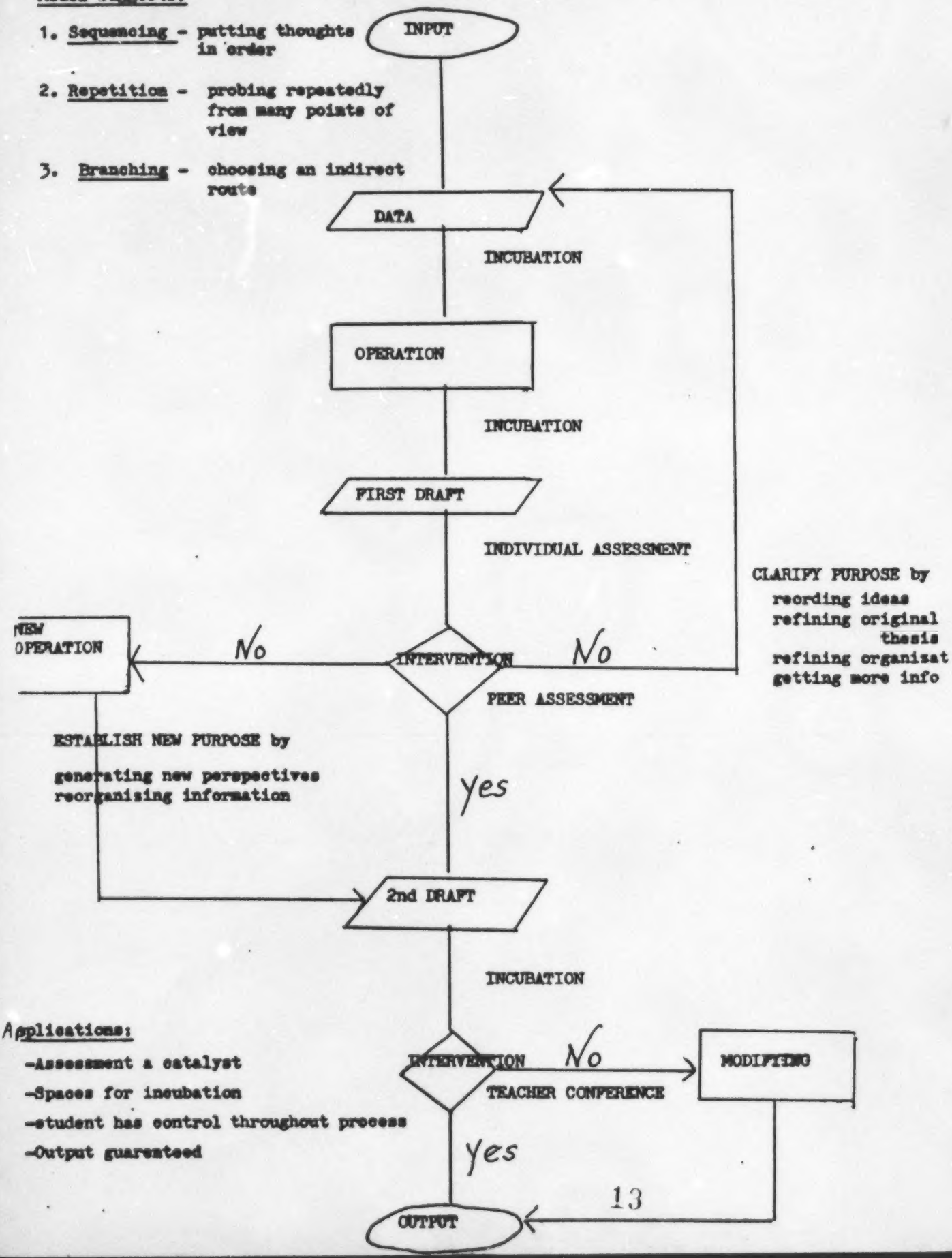
gathering all I need to get the process started

processing or acting upon all the information I have gathered

assessing/choosing which path to take for the next draft.

Model suggests:

1. Sequencing - putting thoughts in order
2. Repetition - probing repeatedly from many points of view
3. Branching - choosing an indirect route



Applications:

- -Assessment a catalyst
- -Spaces for incubation
- -student has control throughout process
- -Output guaranteed

My understanding of assessment for both my own and my students' application of it is based upon a theory and practice developed by the faculty of Alverno College in Milwaukee. They define the act of assessment as first of all observing and then judging according to criteria which are individual, not product based. This means that assessment provides an opportunity for persons to develop as well as demonstrate their competence.

Assessment is an activity that ought to pervade the entire writing process. In the February issue of College Composition and Communication, 1982, Maxine Hairston writes that "we need to know How to intervene during the act of writing if we are to affect an outcome." An assessment tool then can be judged effective if it leads the students to observe and evaluate their own work. It ought to move them beyond mere editing. Furthermore, it should allow students to dialogue intelligently among themselves or others about their writing.

Students working through a series of carefully constructed and sequenced questions can learn to get at their paper as a whole first and then probe successively more specific elements which provide clarity and continuity to the whole composition. These questions should be simple enough so as not to distract students from focusing upon their writing and profound enough to enable them to gain a deeper insight into their work each time they use it.

I have been experimenting with a particular assessment sheet which I think is moving toward meeting the criteria I mentioned above.

Composition is considered as a whole first.

NEUMANN COLLEGE
ASTON, PA

CRITERIA FOR AN ESSAY

1. CLARITY OF FOCUS

1 and 2 should provide that underlying sense o the direction that the writer wants to take.

A. What problem is the writer dealing with?

Checks overall focus

B. What specifically is being said about this problem?

Provides summary-clue to strategy used for developing thesis.

2. ADEQUATE DEVELOPMENT OF IDEAS

A. What does the writer say at the end of the essay to summarize, reassert, or offer as a solution to the problem?

First draft often establishes only a direction for the writer to take.

A more specific purpose could be in the last paragraph.

3. CLEAR AND COHERENT SENTENCES/PARAGRAPHS

A. Give specific examples of how the writer connected sentences and/or paragraphs.

Checks system of "alerts" which keep reader from feeling "lost."

Aids in analysis of structure.

4. APPROPRIATE EXAMPLES AND EVIDENCE

A. What specific examples or evidence are given to support the main point of the essay?

Checks concreteness and specificity.

Probes more specific.

5. APPROPRIATE WORD CHOICE

A. What words or word groups are particularly fitting in this situation?

Checks for an appropriate/consistant voice.

6. VARIED SENTENCE STRUCTURE

A. Write at least two sentences you think are written in more than a simple S V pattern.

Checks for sentence variety and complexity.

7. APPROPRIATE PUNCTUATION, USAGE

A. List any errors and correct them.

The assessment sheet can be used in this way:

1. Students receive an assessment sheet with each assignment and fill it out when the first draft is completed.
2. In class students receive another assessment sheet, exchange compositions and fill in the sheet without marking another's work.
3. Students then discuss the similarities and differences in their responses. If the difference is substantial, then there is basis for deciding whether or what kinds of changes need to be made.
4. Another draft of the composition is completed and this as well as the peer discussion is the basis for dialogue with the instructor.

I believe that more than in any phase of the writing process, assessment is meant to be a collaborative endeavor. Kenneth Bruffee explains that collaborative learning provides students with a unique opportunity for learning they may not have in another context. Students through this approach to assessment are able to move from making observations to making a judgment and then to making a series of judgments about their writing.

This procedure has the advantage of providing several opportunities for probing as well as a number of contexts for this to take place. Another benefit from using an assessment sheet is that it offers guided feedback about the work which fosters a consistant approach for the writer and an efficient procedure for the assessor. As you can suspect, practice makes the responses on the assessment sheet more precise and the conferences with the instructor more efficient.

These assessment sheets can be useful to more than the student. Each semester, I examine the students' responses to determine whether or not this

method is helping them become more self-directed in revising drafts.

I would like now to discuss an activity which I believe enables students to get in touch with the wholeness of the writing process where they see themselves as part of a larger community of writers. It was in Elaine Maimon's in Writing Across Disciplines that I first became aware of the need to introduce students to the experience of both private and public writing. The question I then asked myself was, "How can journal keeping contribute to students' realizing themselves writers?" Somehow I wanted the journal to be more than a repository of ideas for writing papers. I wanted students to become aware that writing is not just a way of knowing and thinking about something, but actually is a way of knowing and thinking about themselves as writers.

D. Gordon Rohman suggests this possibility in his writings about keeping a journal. Private writing or Creative Personal Writing, as he calls it, is a way of knowing with language as well as of thinking with language. Much education in the classroom, Rohman maintains, is horizontal; that is, students may learn how to write but what is sometimes missing is their learning vertically - where they come to the realization and experience of what learning about writing does to them as writers. I believe students can be made aware of the intersection of these two points of learning in their writing experience through a guided approach to journal keeping. It is a way students can come to know themselves better as writers. Students first of all must be aware of their specific purpose for keeping a journal. A theme like Reflections on Myself as Writer will focus upon the individual as writer.

Entries should be grouped in pairs.

1st entry - this is to record their "first seeing". Students describe this event at the time and place it occurs to them. Suitable questions might be:

What happened in writing class?

What happened when I read this or that article/text?

What did it do to me?

Paired with that at a later time:

2nd entry - Now the student "re-collects" the event.

What did this event or activity mean to me as a writer?

Pairing entries establishes specific frames or focuses for students to consider one experience at a time.

Moffett's theory of discourse seems to support this system of paired entries. Pairing provides the students with means for moving progressively from describing what is happening in writing class to writing about what is happening to them personally as writers.

This is an example of how a student has responded to this approach:

1st entry: I started to write anything just to keep up the pace and suddenly when I was just getting warmed-up, the instructor called stop! We shifted our approach and I had to begin all over again! This kind of frustration I don't need!

2nd entry: It is amazing what these exercises made me do. If I am determined to do something, ideas will be generated. I am amazed what expansions of thought I can achieve when I am timed and if I concentrate.

At the end of a semester students can give continuity and richness to their journal entries by choosing to "go public". They can produce any number of creative forms: an autobiographical sketch, or an article on how to become a better writer are two examples.

Let me summarize by referring again to this CPM. Through this heuristic, Claudia and I have discovered an underlying principle and pattern which stimulates and extends our creative thinking and enables us to raise challenging questions. We are only beginning to investigate CPM's greater potential as a stimulus for encouraging faculty to rethink their use of writing in the

classroom and students to work for greater flexibility in their writing.

With the volume of researching in this field, what I have discussed is certainly not new, but what I believe is indispensable for directing students in the art of composing is for the instructor to become grounded firmly in sound theory of rhetoric and then to "create" a variety of approaches to get the job done. These approaches must be constantly re-evaluated and accommodated to the instructor's particular teaching style as well as the particular needs of students. This is what I believe this seminar has enabled me to accomplish.

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